

“Pop” and TV Screens are driving up Obesity and Diabetes on the Reservation

Soft Drinks or “Pop” consumption on Indian reservations is widespread and most likely directly contributing to high rates of obesity, diabetes, tooth decay, bone loss and poor nutrition. “Pop” is defined as carbonated beverages or “fizzy” drinks that contain high amounts of sugar in particular “high fructose corn syrup.” Other sweetened fruit drinks like fruit punch, fruit flavored “ades” (Kool-Aid) and popular sports drinks also have added sugars.

The Director of Indian Health Service, Dr. Charles Grimm, is calling for action from all health professionals to educate people of the dangers of drinking “pop” and other sweetened beverages.

Across Indian communities, health problems associated with obesity and diabetes are increasing at an alarming rate. Seventy percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native adults aged 20-64 year old males and females are now considered overweight or obese. Overweight and obesity is now the most common medical problem of American Indian and Alaskan Native youth and 25% percent of overweight or obese children are already showing signs of diabetes by as young as age 4. Children with diabetes may not live as long as children without diabetes.

While no single factor is responsible for the three-fold increase in childhood obesity, American Indians and Alaskan Natives drink *twice* as much “pop” as other US teens. “Pop” is the largest source of “added sugars” and accounts for 20% of total calories in children’s daily diets. For example, one 12 year old reported drinking a six-pack of “regular pop” every day “because he was thirsty all the time.” A six-pack of “pop” contains 3 cups of sugar and can add 3-pounds a week! By eliminating “pop” and other sugar containing drinks, young people can protect themselves against becoming overweight and diabetic. Overweight and obesity is now the most common medical problem of American Indian and Alaskan Native youth.

“Pop” Consumption and Bone Health

Recent surveys now confirm what nutrition professionals have suspected for years, *children drink “pop” and other sweetened drinks instead of milk* lowering a child’s protein, calcium zinc and Vitamins A and C intake. Children who don’t drink milk are at higher risk for bone loss and fractures because nearly 40% of bones are formed during the teenage years. It is not surprising that only 13.5% of girls and 36.3% of boys aged 12-19 actually meet calcium requirements for good bone health. The “fizz” or carbonation of “pop” pulls calcium out of bones weakening them and causing fractures. “Pop” also contains caffeine which weakens bones further and can become addictive requiring more and more to quench thirst.

“Pop” in School Vending machines

A recent survey showed that out of 523 school districts, 50% of schools had contracts with soft drink companies and nearly 80% of them received money from the sales.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that the “providing soft drinks in schools can lead to childhood obesity” and should focus on providing more nutritious, lower calorie beverages such as water, milk, 100% fruit juice and vegetable juice. Communities and schools are uniting across America to pass legislation *banning* the sale of soft drinks in schools especially during meal times. However, much more effort needs to focus on competitive foods, foods sold at school stores and at fundraisers.

Tooth Decay

According to a recent Indian Health Service Survey on Oral Health, 79% of Indian children aged 2-5 years have tooth decay and rates seem to climb as children age. “Pop” erodes tooth enamel especially if sipped throughout the day causing continuous exposure of harmful acids formed in the mouth.

What are Indian Communities doing to lower consumption of “Pop”?

The Frazer school has taken the first step by eliminating “pop” machines from their school. This is the only school on the Fort Peck reservation with no “pop” machines in school.

In 2001, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and the Alaska Native Health Board launched a very successful campaign with the message that soda consumption earns “double Ds” for *decay and diabetes*.

In Larsen Bay, Alaska removed soda from all schools and replaced them with water. This has had a great impact on obesity rates and oral health.

Rock Point Community Schools in Arizona has mandated that no pop will be sold on school campus grounds.

Lummi Nation Indian Business Council signed a resolution to encourage healthy beverage consumption and launched a tribal wide educational campaign.

Hopi Nation has replaced all of their vending machines with healthier beverages.

What about Activity?

Did you know that on the average 8-18 year olds spend *4 hours/day* watching TV and DVDs and spend an *additional hour* on the computer, and approximately *50 minutes* playing video games? This adds up to over 5 hours per day and over 40-hours per week in sedentary pursuits!

Two-thirds of American youth have a TV in their bedrooms and/or have video game players and/or computers. Youth who have TVs in their rooms spend almost 2 hours a day watching TV over youth without a set in their room.

What should you do?

Take the TV out of the bedroom and LIMIT total “*screen*” time to 2 hours a day or less. Screen time refers to computer, TV and individual video game screens. Make a family agreement to limit TV/DVD/video watching or gaming to 2 hours or less a day. Participate in activities with your children and have active family playtime. Spend 60 minutes per day in engaged in vigorous physical activity with your children.

Summary

“Pop” consumption and other sweetened beverages are not good for youth or adults. Rates of obesity, diabetes, and tooth decay can be directly tied to excessive consumption.

Youth and future generations of Americans should be educated on the dangers of drinking “pop” and healthy alternatives to “pop” should be available such as water, milk, and sugar free beverages. Activity is critical to healthy children and adults. Aim for at least 60 minutes on most days of the week and choose active playtime with your children over of passive screen time.